



March 2-8 is Drug and Alcohol Awareness Week

## UNDERSTANDING THE RISKS OF ALCOHOL

*There are millions of people with alcohol problems in this country. More than 76 million people have been exposed to alcoholism in the family, and evidence shows that the affects of alcohol abuse are a growing issue of concern due to risk, prevalence, societal impact and expense.*

If you are like many Americans, you may drink alcohol occasionally. Or, like others, you may drink moderate amounts of alcohol on a more regular basis. Drinking at these levels usually is not associated with health risks. But moderate drinking, under certain circumstances, is not completely risk free, such as when people drink and drive, are pregnant or taking certain medicines. By drinking at more than moderate levels, you may be putting yourself at risk for serious problems with your health and problems with loved ones and co-workers.

### Moderate Alcohol Use

If you are a woman or someone over the age of 65, this means that you have no more than one drink per day. If you are a man, this means that you have no more than two drinks per day. A drink is commonly defined as:

- 12 ounces of regular beer
- 5 ounces of wine
- 1.5 ounces of 80 proof distilled spirits

*This limit is based on differences between the sexes in both weight and metabolism. Beer ranges considerably in its alcohol content, with malt liquor being higher in its alcohol content than most other brewed beverages.*

### Alcohol Abuse

Not all problems associated with alcohol are the result of alcoholism. In fact, alcohol abuse is more common and more costly to society. Alcohol abusers include those who binge drink, defined as the consumption of five or more drinks at one sitting for males, and three or more drinks in one sitting for females. Many people who abuse alcohol continue to drink despite the fact that their drinking causes them recurrent and significant problems, such as impaired performance on the job or at school; neglect of childcare or household responsibilities; strained relationships; legal and financial difficulties; accidents and injuries; and involvement in violent or criminal acts.

### Alcohol Dependence

Alcohol dependence is a chronic and often progressive disease that includes a strong need to drink despite repeated social or interpersonal problems such as losing a job or deteriorating relationships with friends and family members. Alcohol dependence has a generally predictable course and recognizable symptoms.

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## Drinking and Driving

It may surprise you to learn that you don't need to drink much alcohol before your ability to drive becomes impaired. Although most States set the BAC limit for adults who drive after drinking at 0.08 to 0.10 percent, impairment of driving skills begins at much lower levels.

## Interactions With Medications

Alcohol interacts negatively with more than 150 medications. Some medication side effects, such as drowsiness, are compounded by alcohol and make driving or operating heavy machinery even more hazardous. The combination of certain medications and alcohol can pose serious health risks, such as severe liver damage.

## Alcohol-Related Birth Defects

Alcohol can cause a range of birth defects among those children whose mothers drank alcohol while pregnant. Those born with fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) can have severe physical abnormalities, mental impairment, and behavior problems.

### Long-Term Health Problems

Because alcohol affects many organs in the body, long-term heavy drinking puts you at risk for developing serious health problems such as:

**Liver disease:** More than two million Americans suffer from alcohol-related liver disease which includes conditions such as alcoholic hepatitis, or inflammation of the liver; and cirrhosis, scarring of the liver.

**Heart Disease and Stroke:** Moderate drinking can have beneficial effects on the heart, but long-term heavy drinking increases the risk for high blood pressure, heart disease, and some forms of stroke.

**Cancer:** Long-term heavy drinking increases the risk of developing cancer of the esophagus, mouth, colon, and, for women who consume two or more drinks per day, cancer of the breast.

**Pancreatitis:** The pancreas has a role in digesting the food we eat and helps to regulate blood sugar levels. Long-term heavy drinking can lead to pancreatitis, or inflammation of the pancreas.

Many of these health problems can be fatal but, because some of them are both reversible and treatable, it is important to talk to your doctor who can advise you about your health and treatment options.

## Interpersonal Problems

The more heavily you drink, the greater the potential for problems at home, at work, with friends, and even with strangers. For every person with an alcohol problem, at least four others are negatively affected by their behavior.

For more information about the risks of alcohol, or to seek assistance for yourself or a loved one, contact SYMMETRY at (414) 256-4800 or (800) 236-7905 for confidential assistance.



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